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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001897

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SUBJECT: ABD AL-MEHDI BLAMES PM FOR IMPASSE WITHIN SHIA  
COALITION BUT LOOKING FOR A WAY OUT

REF: BAGHDAD 1894

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad per 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a June 5 lunch, Ambassador told Iraqi VP and SCIRI political leader Adel Abd al-Mehdi that SCIRI is widely perceived as being responsible for scuttling PM Maliki's plan on June 4 to bring his candidates for Minister of Interior and Defense to the Council of Representatives (CoR) for a vote (reftel). Mehdi insisted that SCIRI is blameless, adding that Maliki had handled the negotiations poorly by using Shahrستاني as an intermediary. Ambassador insisted that Maliki is being undermined by his own bloc and that SCIRI needs to fix it. Mehdi insisted that forcing the UIC to accept the PM's choice would weaken Maliki more within his bloc. Ambassador proposed that the UIC issue a statement of support for whomever the PM presents for MOI, which would leave Maliki the opportunity to consider another candidate. Mehdi promised to consult within the UIC and get back to the Ambassador within hours.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY CONT'D: Mehdi also sought Ambassador's clearance on SCIRI candidate for MOI General Mohammad Abdullah Mohsin (current head of Border Guards and advisor to former Interior Minister Bayan Jabr). Ambassador recalled meeting Mohsin but said that he had not given him serious attention since we had assessed him as weak and Mohsin himself had said he was not interested in the job. Mehdi explained that Mohsin's reluctance stemmed from concern that he could get caught in the crossfire of intra-Shia rivalries.  
END SUMMARY.

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Mehdi Blames Maliki and Shahrستاني  
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¶3. (C) During a June 5 lunch, Ambassador took Iraqi VP and SCIRI political leader Adel Abd al-Mehdi to task for the previous day's fiasco in the Council of Representatives (CoR). The Ambassador told Adel that what "you did to him" yesterday was not good and had weakened the PM. Mehdi agreed that Iraq does not need a weak PM, adding that Maliki had been tired and nervous and had handled the negotiations for the MOD and MOI positions poorly.

¶4. (C) Mehdi blamed Hussein Shahrستاني for the confusion and disarray within the UIC. The UIC, according to Adel, had agreed initially on three names for Interior Minister: Nasser Abadi, Mowaffaq Rubaie, and Jawad Al-Bolani. Farouq Al-Araji, Mehdi said, had been rejected as a candidate by the UIC. Nevertheless, during discussions within UIC and with Tawafuq, Shahrستاني tried to present Al-Araji's candidacy as enjoying wide UIC support, instead of simply stating that he was the PM's choice. Shahrستاني created huge confusion, Mehdi noted, even among the Kurds. Mehdi insisted, however, that Maliki would not be weakened by this situation.

Ambassador stated that, regardless of UIC intent, the result will be a weakened PM.

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SCIRI's Reasonable Criteria  
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15. (C) Mehdi said that SCIRI has been guided by three principles regarding the MOI and MOD choices. First, the candidates must be credible to the Coalition. Second, the Minister of Interior must, at the very least, be competent enough to restore order. Third, the candidate should enjoy a certain consensus agreement. Mehdi said that he thinks the PM had never considered Qassim Daoud for MOI in order to "punish" him for his attitude (presumably during internal Shia negotiations about the Prime Ministry.) When Mehdi asked for the Ambassador's views of Mowaffaq and Mohsin, Ambassador responded that his main filter for serious candidates was whether the Prime Minister was interested. Ambassador noted that he had never heard that Rubaie was on the PM's list; we like Rubaie, he added, who is well suited for his current job as National Security Advisor and best left where he is.

16. (C) Ambassador recalled meeting Mohsin but never giving him serious consideration because Moshin said he did not want the job due to security concerns. In addition, Ambassador said, we thought Mohsin was relatively weak. Mehdi explained that Mohsin's real reluctance to accept the MOI job was because, as Mohsin reportedly told Mehdi, "I (Mohsin) will fight terror and violence, but if there is trouble between the Shia, I don't want to be in the crossfire." Mehdi said that he had reassured Mohsin of "their" (Shia) support and insisted to the Ambassador that Mohsin is a professional who

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had done a good job on border security.

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Situation Weakens the Prime Minister  
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17. (C) Ambassador returned to the need to fix the damage being done to the PM. If the PM is coerced by his own bloc to change positions now, Ambassador stated, he looks weak. Ambassador referred to Maliki's proposal (via Talabani) to Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim that if SCIRI would support Al-Araji, then the PM would review his performance within three months and dismiss him if necessary. Mehdi insisted that such a dismissal would also weaken the PM. "No one" knows Al-Araji, Mehdi said. Mehdi resisted the idea of giving Maliki his candidate, since if Maliki "wins," he may think that his approach was correct, which would cause more problems later. Better, said Mehdi, for the PM to show that he and his bloc are a team that can win hearts and minds.

18. (C) Mehdi also denied that Maliki ever received the UIC's blessing to go forward to the CoR with his candidate without UIC approval. Mehdi claimed that Dawa party members also opposed the PM's candidate for MOI and that Najaf had seen the situation as possibly leading to the end of the UIC. Ambassador made clear that if the PM is denied his candidates, he will be perceived as having failed his first test. It also does not look good, Ambassador remarked, for the UIC and SCIRI to be seen as undermining their own PM. The situation calls for SCIRI to help Maliki, Ambassador recommended. Mehdi rebuffed this conclusion, repeating that the PM would be weakened more if the UIC were forced to support him.

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Ambassador Recommends Statement of Support  
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19. (C) Ambassador proposed that the UIC issue a clear, unambiguous public message that it would support the PM's

choice. Then, Ambassador said, let the PM decide: Maliki might rethink his position, but if he does, it would be from a position of strength. Mehdi remained noncommittal but promised to consult and get back to the Ambassador within hours. Ambassador said that if the UIC could make such a statement of support, he would talk to the PM and see if he wants to change his mind -- a solution that would avoid humiliation. The Ambassador closed by reminding Adel that he would support the PM's choice.

KHALILZAD